KELLY'S LIMIT.

The Politician, the Hydrant Key and the Sixth Ward Improvement Association.

(Saturday Evening Post.)

When Kelly was Democratic County Central-Committeeman the air was full of hydrant-keys. So Kelly reached out and grabbed one, and took it home and tried it on the hydrant in front of Larry's saloon at the corner. It fitted beautifully.

Three months later Michael Kelly & Co., Practical Sprinklers, had five vertical-spray wagons at work in the Sixth Ward. The hydrant-key was also at work. It struck the official city hydrants like Moses' rod and the water gushed out gratuitously. When the monthly water-bills were emitted from the City Hall to the sprinkling companies none ever made its way to Kelly. He had never applied for the hydrant-key. He had found it.

Kelly was very good at finding things. Things came his way and fluttered around his smile like sand-flies around a lamp.

The first thing he had found, after fortifying his youthful health by a long career on the baseball field, had been an appropriate position as clerk in the Health Department. His weight and complexion seemed to qualify him to adorn and to exemplify that department.

During the course of the first forenoon he appeared before the Commissioner of Health with an expression of just resentment on his face.

"That fellow MacManaman's been giving me orders," said he. "I just wanted you to stop him."

"What you are talking about " said the Commissioner. "MacManaman's chief clerk. He's got a right to give you orders."

Kelly was stunned. Then he smiled slowly as the full extent of MacManaman's perfidy laid itself bare.

"Sure, he's been keeping it from you," said Kelly. "He ain't told you anything about it. I don't blame him, but you ought to know."

"Know what?" said the Commissioner irritably.

"He's a Connaught man," said Kelly, still smiling at the thought of the joke that MacManaman had been playing on the Commissioner.

It was the Commissioner's turn to be stunned.

"You're crazy, Kelly," he said. "Run along."

Kelly's smile was replaced with a flush of amazement and of scorn. "I won't run along," he said. "It ain't right," and I won't stand for it. A man from Connaught! Me take orders from a man from Connaught! Just because he's got to be chief clerk! Not while I can remember where my mother is buried!"

This speech made Kelly with the Mayor. Before closing time in the afternoon, the gossips of the City Hall had apprised his Honor of the fact that in the Health Department there was a new Irishman whose ideas of business organization were such that he refused to take orders from the chief clerk on the ground that the latter came from some district in Ireland of which his mother had disapproved.

His Honor was delighted. He was a tired man with weary eyes and a kindly, indulgent smile. Nothing pleased him more than the foibles of his subordinates or their scruples. In the gray sea of politics these foibles or scruples (they looked much alike to him) were so many charming little whitecaps, breaking into froth and relieving the monotony.

He sent for Kelly.

"I hear you're going to leave," he said.

"Sure and I'm not," said Kelly.

"But you said you wouldn't take orders from MacManaman."

"What's that got to do with leaving?" said Kelly.

The Mayor lay back in his chair and felt rested. His eyes twinkled and he looked at Kelly with the amused smile in which few politicians detected the note of semi-contemptuous superiority.

"Kelly," he said, "you're a bird! I think I'd like to make you assistant to my secretary. He never heard of Connaught. Will you do it?"

From that time on Kelly found things with even greater ease than before. His Honor was a good judge of men. If a man would stand up against Connaught just because his mother had expressed an aversion to it, his Honor calculated that he would spend his time and money for a friend just because he saw him every day. That was the kind of man his Honor needed.

So Kelly found a seat in the City Council and then a seat in the County Central Committee, and then the hydrant-key above mentioned, which turned out to be the most important find that he had ever made.

For several years that hydrant-key worked industriously and profitably. It tapped the hydrants in the Sixth Ward and the vertical-spray wagons shot the macadam pavements full of holes after the manner of such wagons, and Kelly's neighbors paid him four cents a front foot per month, and Kelly himself spent a large part of the money in Larry's saloon at the corner. Especially did he spend his money on O'Brien.

O'Brien wasn't a Democratic County Central-Committeeman, but he tried to be in the sprinkling business, and he had to look for his hydrant-key with a fifty-dollar permit before he could find it. Also, he had to come up with a hundred dollars every month for the water which his sprinkling wagons consumed. These drawbacks resulted in the transfer of a large part of his business to Kelly. So Kelly was always finding him over at Larry's corner

"He's a fine fellow, that Kelly," said O'Brien.

"O'Brien's all right," said Kelly. "I'm going to get his mother a job to be janitress in the City Hall."

But then there arose in the City Hall, in place of the Mayor with the indulgent smile, a new Mayor, a young man who thought he knew more than men who were old enough to be his father. This young man invented the idea that everybody should pay for his hydrant-key and that the water-office should know where all the hydrant-keys were. So he sent out a bunch of knockers who rounded up all the hydrant-keys in the city. Among others they found Kelly's. They found it undeniably working with its nose in the corner hydrant just outside Larry's saloon.

Kelly went down at once to see the Mayor.

"Who's been knocking me?" said Kelly.

"Nobody," said the Mayor.

"I've always been with you," said Kelly, "and if anybody says I ain't he's a liar."

So then, with instinctive native diplomacy, Kelly said nothing further, but went out silently to look for his key. He had squared himself with the Mayor, and he loafed about the corridors of the water-office waiting for the custodian of the keys to get the tip.

There seemed to be a delayed pass about that tip.

"I put myself right with the Mayor," said Kelly to the new Water Commissioner. "Somebody's been trying to queer me, but I got there in time. I'm strong now."

"Glad to hear it," said the Water Commissioner, shaking hands hurriedly and then turning back to the diagrams on his desk. This was the same Water Commissioner who invented the idea of having the men in the water-office come down to work every day. His intention of slighting Kelly by going on working in his presence was too obvious to be overlooked.

"They've been knocking me to you, too," said Kelly. "There's somebody working against me."

A few days later his suspicions were confirmed. He went in to see the Mayor about Mrs. O'Brien. It was the first time that he had asked a job from the new administration. His smile was a smile of confidence as he entered the Mayor's office. But when he came out his teeth were set and his eyes had the look of a man who is searching for his enemy. The Mayor had put him off with the transparent subterfuge that Mrs. O'Brien was over eighty years old, and that a somewhat younger woman might be more satisfactory in carrying pails and in scrubbing floors.

"I hate a knocker," said Kelly that night over Larry's bar. "And I'll find that fellow who's been knocking me if it takes me a thousand years. If a man can go into politics and get some favors for himself I ain't got no kick coming, eh? Ain't that right? But when a fellow don't want anything for himself, but just goes around and knocks another fellow and keeps him from getting what he wants, I ain't got no time for him. That's what, ain't it? That's good sense. I bet it's one of them fellows from the Citizens' Sixth Ward Neighborhood Improvement Association. Ever see such a bunch of knockers? Never around except when they've got a kick! Did they do anything for the Mayor when he was running? Not on your life! But just listen to the roar they make about the streets! And did you see the street-cleaning expert they've got from Boston? Looks like one of these British officers you used to see the pictures of in the Boer War. I put up my money for the Mayor when he was elected. That's what I did. I didn't see any of them Improvement fellows around then. All that they want is to have the city work for them without them doing anything for the man that's got to be elected to run the city. Cheap trick, ain't it? If any of them's been knocking me, I'll show him up to the Mayor till he's good and sick."

Six months passed while Kelly was searching for his concealed foes. It was a time of great mystery and the days were long. Every morning Kelly came down to the City Hall and resumed his labor of exploration. Every evening he took the car for home with his antagonists still undiscovered.

The Mayor was reticent. All that he would say was that as far as janitresses were concerned he could get younger and stronger women for the same wages.

"But Mrs. O'Brien needs the job," said Kelly. "She ain't got enough to eat."

For once the Mayor's clear course of duty looked dubious to him. He frowned and hesitated. But then, "I can't help it," he said. "I've got to get the most I can out of the city's money."

The Water Commissioner was as reticent as the Mayor. Every day Kelly dropped in to chat with the custodian of the hydrant-keys. And every day he lounged by the Water Commissioner's desk. But there was no response. The keys were all labeled, ticketed, pigeonholed and card-catalogued. They no longer lay about loose on the tops of the desks. They no longer protruded promiscuously from the pockets of friendly clerks.

"I've got nothing against you, Kelly," said the Water Commissioner. "But everybody else is paying for their keys and for their water. You can't expect me to make an exception for you."

Kelly was more chagrined and more bewildered than ever as he dropped heavily into a seat on a homeward-bound car that evening. He was very tired. His sprinkling business had been rapidly dropping away from him. He was obliged now to pay a hundred dollars a month for his water, and he had also been compelled to make a payment of fifty dollars for one of the new breed of ticketed and card-catalogued hydrant-keys. He longed for the old, beatific, phantom kind of key which just grew out of the atmosphere without any preliminary financial ceremonies. Under the new system he hadn't been able to meet the competition of the other sprinkling firms. He had done his best. He had frequented the City Hall from morning to night. He had walked himself sick searching for the inscrutable influence which had poisoned the mind of the administration against him. His efforts had been vain. He felt beaten. But just then the car swung roung the corner and the familiar sight of Larry's saloon and of his faithful admirers standing in the doorway filled him with renewed confidence.

"I'll find them yet," said Kelly to himself as he dropped off the car.

"Have a drink, boys," he continued, walking happily through the crowd into the saloon and jingling two quarters together in his pocket.

Larry with an automatic impulse from days gone by, looked at him expecting him to draw out a roll of bills and hold them in his hands. He failed to do so. Larry came back to date with a jerk.

"The drinks are on me," he said brusquely.

"No, they're not," said Kelly.

"Sure they are," said Larry. "What'll you have gentlemen?"

Kelly looked at him sharply and got very red.

"I'm going to buy," said Kelly with an edge on his voice. "Can't I buy if I want to"

It was plain from Larry's face that he was convicted. And the men in the room had a fellow-consciousness of guilt as they drew up to the bar and drank the drink which each of them wished he was paying for. Everybody wanted to speak.

Nobody spoke. For the first time in his life Kelly himself hunted for something to say without finding it.

The empty glasses were set down on the table and Kelly walked back by the slot-machine and dragged a chair toward the window.

Then O'Brien thought of a subject for conversation. He was still in the sprinkling business and he thought Kelly would be interested in a piece of trade gossip.

"What d'you think?" he said. "I hear the Sixth Ward Improvement Association's got a permit for free water for sprinkling and the Mayor's given them a free hydrant-key."

Kelly rose from his seat very white.

"What did you say? A free hydrant-key?"

"Yep. They've raised a subscription for cutting down the weeds on the vacant lots and for filling up the holes in the pavements. And they've hired fellows to come from all over the United States to lecture for them and to tell them how the city is run. So the Mayor's given them a free hydrant-key because they're mixing up in public affairs and he's grateful to them. It's all about making the city beautiful."

Kelly's roar of rage called in all the idlers from around the corner. "They're the fellows that's been after me!" he cried. "They got the Mayor to take my key away from me and now they've got one of their own. If they'd come to me and asked me to get them a key when my pull was good I'd have done it for them all right. You know that.

But they had to go around and stick a knife into me. When I see his Honor tomorrow. I'll find out about this."

The next morning Kelly got up a little bit earlier than usual. On his way through the big corridor to the Mayor's office, he met the Water Commissioner and immediately asked him who was backing the Sixth Ward Improvement Association. The Water Commissioner refused to say. He remarked simply that the Improvement Association was doing a great deal of public-spirited work and that the free water was a reward for its benevolent activity.

His Honor took the same tack. "They're doing a great deal for the ward," he said. "We have to do something for them to keep them interested."

"Who is their friend?" said Kelly.

"I don't know," said the Mayor. "They just wrote me a letter."

Kelly opened his mouth and looked at the Mayor with a glare of incredulity. Then his shoulders sank weakly and he turned without a word and made slowly for the door.

An hour afterward, as he walked up the steps of his house, there was a boy waiting for him on the porch with a dog. The dog was limping and the boy was crying.

"What's the matter," said Kelly, rumpling the boy's hair with his big hand.

"Automobile," said the boy looking down the street. "The man threw me a dollar and told me to get a doctor to fix the dog's leg up. But I thought I'd come to you first."

"That's right," said Kelly.

Half an hour later the dog's leg was wrapped up in a long roll of cloth and Kelly and the boy were sitting on the steps examining him carefully to see if there were any other parts of him that had been injured.

"I told you the man gave me a dollar," said the boy finally, talking a bill out of his pocket and laying it down in front of Kelly.

"Keep your money, kid," said Kelly. "I'm not very strong now, but I guess I can look out for the dogs and the kids." Then, after a pause, he added: "They're the only constits I've got left."

Just then an automobile stopped in front of the house.

"That's him that ran over the dog," said the boy.

A man jumped out of the machine.

"Oh, there's the dog I ran over!" he said. "Hope he's getting better. If you need any more money come around and see me. Sorry I can't stop now. I've got a lot of things to do. It's you I want to see, Mr. Kelly. You know those new sprinkling wagons we've put on for the Improvement Association? Well, we understand that you haven't been working for some time and that you would like something to do. So if you will take a job driving one of those wagons we'll pay you good wages. Three dollars a day. Can you do it?"

Kelly rose somewhat unsteadily.

"Before I'd take a job from you," he said, "I'd go to digging in a ditch."

He said nothing more for a minute, while his blazing eye and quivering lip held the President of the Improvement Association equally speechless.

"Every man's got his limit," said Kelly. "This is mine."

The President of the Improvement Association was puzzled and uncomfortable. He edged away a little bit. "You mean," he stammered—"You mean that you don't want the job?"

"You leave me alone!" said Kelly thickly. "I've got this here dog to tie up." He turned to the dog and began to work on him. The President of the Improvement Association stood silent and irresolute. Kelly continued to work on the dog. The President of the Improvement Association mumbled a few words of bewildered apology and walked back to his automobile.

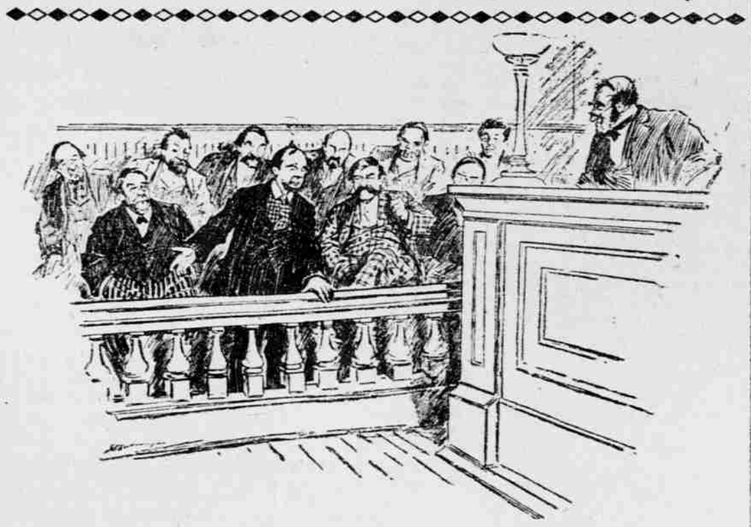
Mrs. Kelly came out from the house.

"Did you turn him down, Mike?" she said.

"I did, Mary," said Kelly. "It was my limit. Here's your dog, kid. Run along. I'll fix you up to be a policeman some day. * * *No, I won't, either. Oh, Mary, they're all aginst me now!"

"Come on inside, Mike," said Mrs. Kelly.

So they went inside together and sat down together in the little front parlor, and together they watched the men going into Larry's saloon.



UNANIMOUS.

"And, gentlemen of the jury, so say you all?" inquired the judge of a certain Arkansas circuit, after the verdict had been brought in.

"Well, the rest of us do, and I reckon I ort to," responded the smallest and most paltry-looking member of the assortment of peers. "You see, I originally differed with, or from—whichever is proper—the rest of these yere gentlmen; but they beat me all holler playin' checkers, downed me at mumblety-peg, and then every one of 'em, when we wrestled, grab-holts, to see which side of the question was right, throwed me flat and set on me. So, all things considered, and keepin' to the agreement, I say, with the balance of 'em, that the prisoner at the bar—I sorter forgit what his name is—is guilty as charged."